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EPA chief: Expect final decision on waste pits before Oct. 14

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Posted: Sunday, September 17, 2017 12:00 am

By Christopher James

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EPA chief: Expect final decision on waste pits before Oct. 14

Environmental Protection Agency chief Scott Pruitt meets with Texas Health and Environmental Alliance Director Jacquelyn Young and Scott Jones with the Galveston Bay Foundation at the San Jacinto Waste pits on Friday. Pruitt the EPA would have a permanent solution for the site before Oct. 14.

in the

eye and shook our hands and we thanked him for coming down to the site," said Young. "He let us know that this site is very important to him, he's concerned about it and he wants our community members to feel safe. He also let us know that they are working quickly to get the final remedy and that it will be a permanent remedy."

"He said we would have the proposal by the time OU plays UT," she added.

Pruitt said he would do what ever it takes to eliminate both the "ongoing risk and the crushing anxiety felt by thousands of Texans that live near the San Jacinto Waste Pits."

Young said Pruitt's visit was very encouraging.

On Friday morning, EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt made a surprise visit to the San Jacinto River Waste Pits and vowed that the EPA would have a permanent solution for the site before the University of Texas and Oklahoma University football game on Oct. 14.

Pruitt, along with Acting Regional Administrator for Region 6 Samuel Coleman, Chairman of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality Bryan Shaw, and Federal Emergency Management Agency officials, was out at the site.

Texas Health and Environmental Alliance Director Jacquelyn Young and Scott Jones with the Galveston Bay Foundation were both there for a brief meeting with Pruitt.

Following the interview, Pruitt, who is an Oklahoma native, walked around and observed the site and then met with Young and Jones on his way out.

"I had prepared a folder of our reports and the facts that we work with, as well as personal letter to Mr. Pruitt. So I had that in my hand and he walked up, looked us both

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"I think the fact that Administrator Pruitt took the time to come down here and see this site for himself really speaks volumes, just seeing the sheer devastation in the area — the fact that you have to take a detour to get the waste pits because the road to get there washed away," said Young. "I think what he came here and saw on the ground is very telling as to the instability of the land that the waste pits are located on."

Following his tour of the San Jacinto Superfund site, Pruitt received an aerial tour of additional affected Superfund sites in the region by the United States Coast Guard. Sites included: Patrick Bayou, U.S. Oil Recovery, San Jacinto River Waste Pits, Highlands Acid Pits, French Unlimited, Brio Refining, and Dixie Oil Processors.

Since Pruitt's visit, Young, Jones and the residents that live near the site hope that the EPA moves forward with its proposed remedy of removing a majority of the existing cap along with 152,000 cubic yards of contaminated materials at the northern site, which is the site of concern since it is partially submerged in the San Jacinto River. This would cost \$87 million and construction is estimated to take 19 months and about 13,300 truckloads to transport waste material to an off-site facility.

When Pruitt was at the site, it was at the same time the EPA was conducting underwater inspections by a dive team, which is what they've been doing all week.

"No final determinations have been made by the dive team. The assessment work is ongoing," said David Gray, EPA Region 6 spokesman. "Repairs are underway on armored layer of the cap. The need for any additional repairs in the area the dive team is inspecting has not been determined."

The EPA along with the responsible parties, International Paper and McGinnes Industrial Maintenance Corporation, has been inspecting the site since Harvey inundated the area with more than 50 inches of rain.

MIMC gave an update to as to the state of the site:

- Ongoing inspection of submerged portions of the armored cap under EPA supervision has continued this week.
- Probing tools were being used to measure and ensure cap thickness underwater along the eastern portion of cap, which is ordinarily partly submerged. (floodwaters there have receded.
- Bathymetric survey measurements, which are usually conducted quarterly as part of regular cap monitoring, were expedited and completed. Results will be reported to the EPA. Bathymetric measurements are taken to study the riverbed's topography and evaluate significant changes or movement beneath surface water.
- Work to replenish rock material on berms on the southern side of the site, located outside the waste containment areas and that do not cover the waste pits, is complete.
- Buoys recovered in the area were secured and re-installed. Permanent site fencing repairs are nearing completion. Replacement of surveillance system cameras where needed is proceeding.
- In addition, an EPA dive team began working on further inspection of the site this week under the EPA's direction.

For more than four decades, the San Jacinto River Waste Pits, which were used as a site to dispose of paper mill sludge by Champion Paper, have plagued the San Jacinto River. Containing mercury, PCBs, furans and cancer-causing dioxins, the waste pits have sat in the river with a temporary armored cap since 2011 that was installed to prevent any release of toxins from the site.

For more information visit www.epa.gov/tx/sjrwtp.

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